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A SERPENT SYMBOL IN INDIAN CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Symbols play an important role in the cultural, religious and philosophical perspective in the history of mankind. The term symbol is explained as something used for or regarded as representing something – a material object representing something immaterial or emblem¹. It also means a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought such as white, the lion, the thunderbolt, the cross are symbols of purity, courage, zeus etc., in another sense, a symbol is a mark or character taken as the conventional sign of some object or idea such as mathematical signs for addition and infinity etc.². In a way it is “*pratika*” or “*cinha*” in order to apprehend some abstract idea or thought. There are many symbols in different religious sects and philosophies in order to heighten the glory and importance of the tenets etc.

A serpent symbol is very common in many ancient religions and cultural life of the people. An attempt is made in this article to study some important features of “serpent” as a symbol in religious-philosophical perspective. In Indian context a serpent is regarded as a deity, friend of human beings. A serpent is also looked upon as a sym-

1. See Random House *Dictionary of English Language*.
2. See *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1964.

bol of time or *kāla* ³. In Buddhism, serpents are supposed to be guardians of trees and springs, sometimes, rhetorically a serpent represents a devil or treacherous man who favours for the base-ends, there are charms and magic *formulae* often used as remedies for snake-bites, a serpent is worshipped in healing rites, omens are drawn from the sight of a serpent such as signal of an earth-quake etc. A serpent is associated with fertility and eroticism ⁴. It is an accepted fact that a serpent worship is quite ancient and it was in vogue in old stone-age. A serpent-concept is linked with “Kuṇḍalinīyoga” an idol of Śiva or Liṅga had a cover of coils of a serpent, there are 6 wheels through which Kuṇḍalinī is to travel in order to reach Śiva so as to avoid birth and death and to get oneself free ⁵. This is yogic activity associated with the serpent or Kuṇḍalinī, which speaks of union of Śiva and Śakti. Svayambhu Liṅga – Pratīka of Śiva – liṅga is surrounded by a serpent, which is a symbol of that power viz. *śakti* of Śiva.

In *purāṇa* literature Śeṣa is known to be one of nine *nāgas* and he bears the burden of the earth. Śeṣa is also the incarnation in the form of Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa’s brother or Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma’s brother. Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are the incarnation of Viṣṇu. A great saga like Patañjali is also the incarnation of Śeṣa. Śeṣa is so called because when the dissolution of the creation viz. Sṛṣṭi takes place, every thing goes but time remains *śeṣa* or it means it is a remainder or residue Śeṣa is a celebrated serpent, said to have one thousand heads and represented as forming a couch of Viṣṇu and supporting the entire world on his head. Such is the importance of a serpent Śeṣa in the *purāṇas* since a serpent is a divine one, it is obvious that serpent worship became popular in public. There are many vows and rites associated with the cult of serpent. *Sarpa-pañcamī*, *nāga-pañcamī*, *nāgabali*, *nāga-dīpāvali* – are quite wellknown. Śiva and Viṣṇu, two prominent Hindu Deities, are closely connected with serpent. Nāgabhuṣaṇa is the epithet of Śiva and Śeṣaśayin is the epithet of Viṣṇu. In Buddhism it is stated that after the enlightenment of Buddha the serpent by name Mucilinda gave protection to Buddha by his hoods over his head. The Jain Tirthaṅkara

3. Viṣṇupurāṇa, 5.9.29.

4. See *Encyclopaedia of Religion & Ethics*, vol. X.

5. See *Shardatilak* - XXV-70 and *Serpent Power* of Arthur Avalon, see p. 3.

Pārśvanātha has had a sign of a serpent. Even in Mohanjo-daro civilisation many serpent idols or images are also found.

Coming to beliefs in connection with the serpent-lore, there are the following prominent ones (1) a serpent guards the hidden treasure. (2) There is a jewel in the head of a serpent, (3) Old dead – ancestors move in the world in the form of serpents, (4) Nāga is not to be killed, otherwise a man will have no son or progeny, (5) Serpents are the friends of farmers in protecting the crop from rats, (6) Poison or slough of a serpent is used as a medicine to cure certain diseases.

A serpent symbolises the sex-force or serpentine energy of animal propensities. It is said “Now the serpent, sex force, was more subtle than any beast of the field viz. any other sense of the body ⁶. Thus it will be clear to know the symbol of a serpent in religious life as well as cultural life as seen earlier. Nowhere we have any philosophical or mystical aspect in a symbol of a serpent. In this context views of Dr. R.D. Ranade, who has been acclaimed to be a great mystic-saint-philosopher are quite noteworthy. Dr. R.D. Ranade has studied in depth the Kannada literature from this point of view in his famous work *Pathway to God in Kannada literature* ⁷.

When he was considering two songs on the serpent in Karnataka mysticism, he says that the serpent is a very favourite idea of Karnataka mystics, it has a two fold significance, firstly it is a symbol of the senses of man, second, it is a symbol of spiritual power ⁸. Kuṇḍalinī, Sadāśivendra Sarasvatī of Mysore, in his small commentary of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, tells us how the serpent might be regarded as a physical symbol of the sense power. Gurudeo Ranade says that those who have got spiritual experiences tell us, that so long as the sensual element is present in man, God appears to him in the shape of a Śeṣa or serpent, but as soon as sensual power fades away the serpent also goes aside an expression used by a great modern saint viz. Bhausahib mahārāja of Umadī. According to Dr. R.D. Ranade, the serpent serves the purpose of indicating a powerful idea with Karnataka saints. The song “hāvu ... manini” speaks of sense aspects of the serpent. We will

6. Genesis 3.1 quoted in Autobiography of a Yogi, p. 170.

7. Published by B. Vidya Bhavan, 1970.

8. *Ibid.*

notice contradictory attitudes in the serpent's moods, anger on the one hand and pleasure and joy on the other. Dr. Ranade refers to the two fold functions of the serpent, serving as the bed of Viṣṇu and necklace of Śiva, it means the serpent has the power of reconciling the opposite claims put forward by the worshippers of Viṣṇu and Śiva. When an aspirant, in his spiritual efforts, knocked out the poisonous fangs of the serpent, it could not inject its poison into the body but a serpent coiled around his legs. So this is the first aspect of the serpent of the senses. Next step is that a serpent becomes ineffective, it is devoured by the spirits and lastly an aspirant says, on we are the serpent-catchers. It is basketted and becomes docile. R.D. Ranade also tells us that these or a serpent bites but has no effect, it will be seen that serpent here symbolises the Kuṇḍalinī. Jñāneśvara gives a graphic picture in connection with serpent power, *Nāgiṇī cī pile kumkume nahila* (6.222). She sleeps likely young serpents bathed in saffron. Dr. Ranade further states that the body is an ant-hill, it has got nine holes or ports of entry called Navarandhras in yogic physiology, through which hole the serpent might enter we do not know. How we might yield to its sensuous influence and through which organ of sense, we do not know, whether the serpent power would penetrate through our eyes or ears or mouth and so on. Prof. R.D. Ranade could read between the lines true meanings of the words of Kannada saints because he had the similar experiences. Dr. Ranade divides Kannada mystics into two schools Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites, a real mystic, however is he who is neither a śaivite nor a vaiṣṇavite. Śeṣa is welcome to both the Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites, Śaivas make Śeṣa into a necklace which decorates the neck of their Lord Śiva, the Vaiṣṇavas look upon Śeṣa as the resting conch of Viṣṇu. So it is this Śeṣa who reconciles these two schools of thought. Both the schools have common spiritual experiences which added to the development of mystical thought in general. This is a mystical view of the symbol of serpent by Dr. R.D. Ranade who had the vision of Śeṣa – or Ananta. Such a mystical view is not found in many books, as such, this a great contribution of Dr. R.D. Ranade to the mystical thought in particular and philosophical thought in general.

A serpent symbol plays a greater role in Vedic literature and Śiva and Viṣṇu *Purāṇas*. In the *Ṛgveda*, there is a reference to a battle between Indra and Ahi (serpent). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* speaks of

Kaliyā-mardana and many folk tales are also built-up on serpents in many parts of India especially in tribal area. As said earlier, a serpent symbol is associated with fertility cult and eroticism. It is quite natural the snake-cult is largely in the hands of women. Who perform Nāga worship in Śrāvana month, who also practice *vratas* in honour of serpents. Even in the art and architecture of ancient India, a serpent symbol has a definite place as can be seen from Bodha-gaya and Barhuta art, where we find the figures of serpents alongwith Buddha. Even for ecological point of view serpents are looked upon as friends of farmers for protecting crops etc. Skin and slough of serpents are equally important. In many *purāṇas* and *Jātakakathās*, we come across the stories of serpents who helped many persons. A serpent is identified with sense-organs including sex and as such serpent symbol is quite vital in human life. However, R.D. Ranade's experiences on serpent-symbols are quite unique in nature, since this type of spiritual experience has found hardly any place in the philosophical literature. We may get few glimpses in purāṇic, *Jātaka* stories of such mystical view but R.D. Ranade's views and mystical vision is quite marvellous, it will bring about harmony in some sects because of the fact that as Dr. Ranade states, the mystical experience is universal has not barriers of religions cult, language. Such is the view of the symbol of a serpent in Indian cultural and philosophical mystical perspective.